Gothic Fiction: A Starter Pack

With roots in the 18th century, this haunted genre's hallmarks can be found throughout modern horror. Here's where to start.

By Emily C. Hughes

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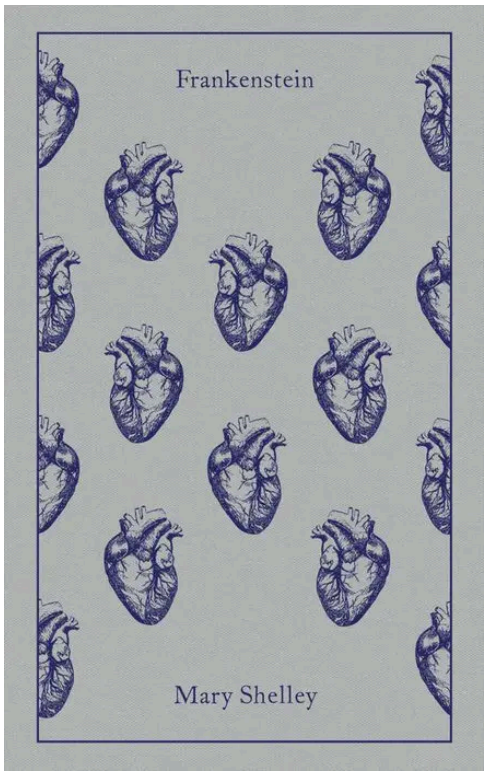
First things first: I won't attempt to provide one clear-cut definition of the Gothic, lest I incur the wrath of a horde of angry postgrads. When the genre emerged in the mid-18th century, early novels and short stories shared a set of common trademarks — good-hearted female characters under the thumb of cruel, powerful men; melodrama and high emotion; supernatural events — and were laden with the social, political and moral anxieties of a rapidly changing moment in European society. But as time has gone on, and the genre has evolved, things have gotten murkier.

Today, the Gothic label is used less to describe (or prescribe) a genre and more to evoke an aesthetic, a mode or (forgive me) a vibe. There are still some common elements and themes to look out for: a foreboding atmosphere; an isolated setting; explorations of otherness, fear and madness; the domestic sphere recast as a place of dread; tension between tradition and desire. But the key hallmark of a Gothic tale for me is the past's insistent encroachment on the present. Bygone transgressions, old wounds, long-forgotten grudges — in a Gothic story, you can never run far enough to escape history.

Getting your arms around the Gothic, with its meandering history and myriad variations, is no easy feat. It casts a long shadow over a number of genres — romance, thrillers, dark fantasy. But horror is the Gothic's closest living relative. Here are 13 Gothic horror picks to get you started.

I want to start with one of the foundational texts



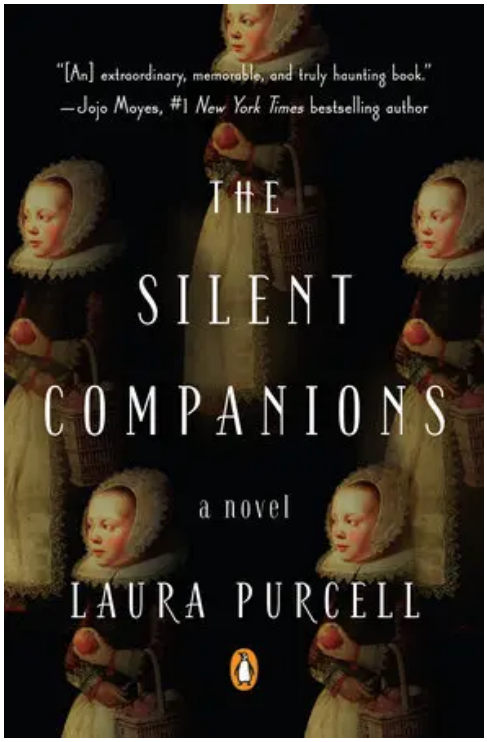
Frankenstein

by Mary Shelley

If you're intent on starting from first principles, you can read early Gothic novels like Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto" or Ann Radcliffe's "The Mysteries of Udolpho." But if you'd rather have an enjoyable reading experience, pick up "Frankenstein." Gothic fiction in the Victorian era was preoccupied with the darkness of the human mind and the tension between science, superstition and spirituality, and nowhere is that more evident than in Shelley's groundbreaking novel, which she dreamed up when she was just 18. Victor Frankenstein is the archetypal mad scientist, and the ramifications of his act of creation are so influential we're still chewing them over today (see: Guillermo del Toro's new film adaptation).

If you read it and love it, try ... Robert Louis Stevenson's "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"; "Carmilla," by J. Sheridan Le Fanu; or "The Turn of the Screw," by Henry James.

I'd like a contemporary novel with Victorian flavor



The Silent Companions

by Laura Purcell

Though contemporary Gothic fiction covers a range of styles and tropes, there's still a deep affection among authors and readers for a classic Victorian setting. Purcell has made her name writing in this mode, and her 2017 novel "The Silent Companions" remains one of her best. When Elsie, pregnant and recently widowed, moves into her late husband's manor house, she finds the staff and the locals standoffish. And hidden away in the house is a wooden figure — one that looks eerily like Elsie. The uncanny double is a classic Gothic trope (think Jekyll and Hyde), and Purcell's take on it is a contemporary classic.

If you read it and love it, try ... "The Little Stranger," by Sarah Waters; Johanna van Veen's "Blood on Her Tongue"; or "Victorian Psycho," by Virginia Feito.

How about an American classic?

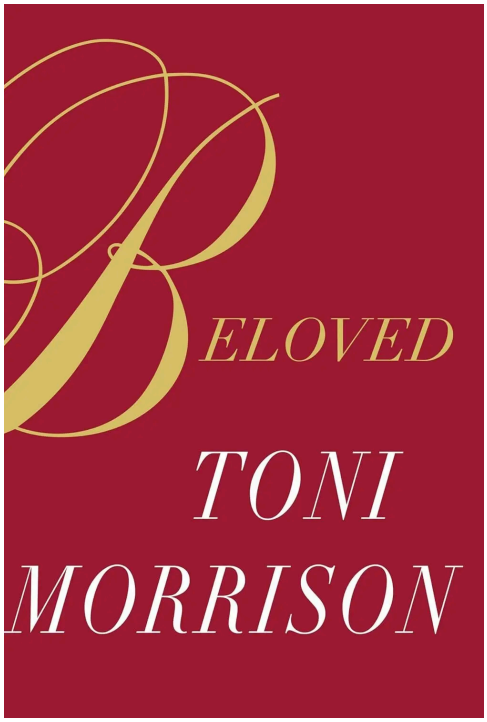
The Fall of the House of Usher

by Edgar Allan Poe

Ruins, both architectural and psychological, are so common in the Gothic it's a wonder there's room for any new construction. The siblings Roderick and Madeline Usher — ill, mad or possibly both — live in a "mansion of gloom," a house that's fractured down to its foundations and which Roderick believes to be alive. The state of the house mirrors that of its residents and, in the finest Gothic tradition, our unnamed narrator bears witness to isolation, rot and the end of a dynasty.

If you read it and love it, try ... "The House of the Seven Gables," by Nathaniel Hawthorne; "Wieland," by Charles Brockden Brown; or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Talk to me about Southern Gothic



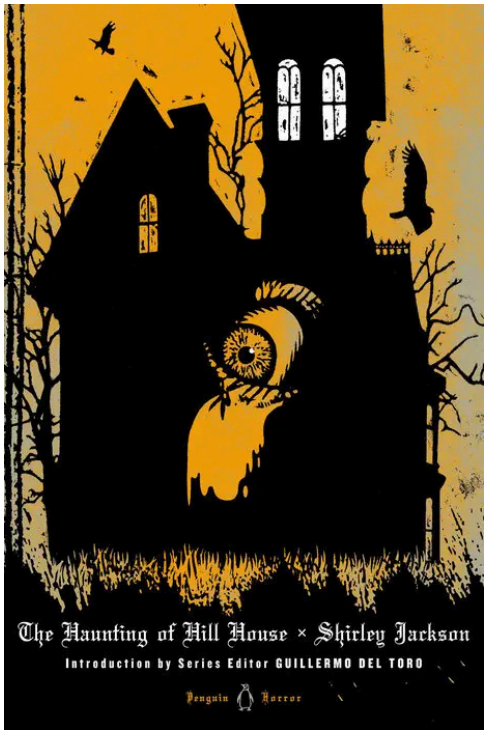
Beloved

by Toni Morrison

It may not be the archetypal Southern Gothic novel, but Morrison's indelible, Pulitzer Prize-winning book announces its genre lineage from its opening lines: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." The house at 124 Bluestone Road is haunted and so is its chief occupant, Sethe — both by the trauma she endured while enslaved and by the spirit of her unnamed baby daughter, whom she killed rather than allow the child to live in bondage. Southern Gothic literature is itself haunted by slavery and racism, the region's original sin, and nowhere is that made more eloquently, heartbreakingly literal than in "Beloved."

If you read it and love it, try ... "Child of God," by Cormac McCarthy; "A Good Man Is Hard to Find: And Other Stories," by Flannery O'Connor; or "The Reformatory," by Tananarive Due.

Wait, are these all just haunted house stories?



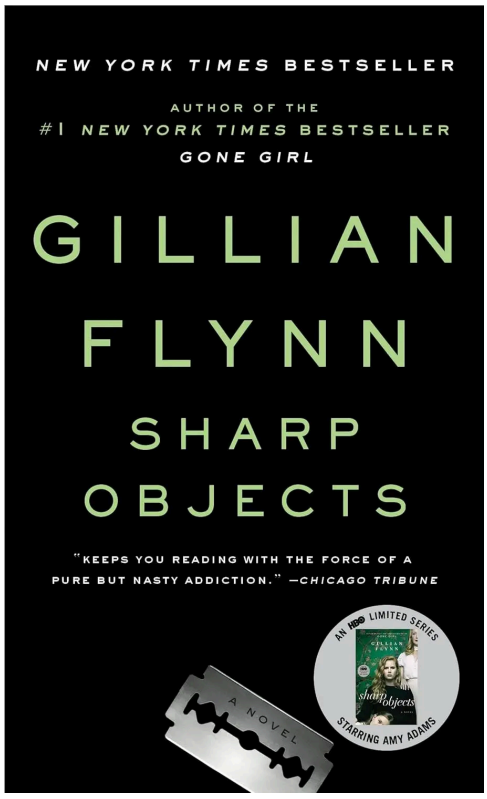
The Haunting of Hill House

by Shirley Jackson

Good catch! Not every haunted house story is Gothic (or vice versa), but the two genres do overlap significantly. After all, what is a ghost if not the past quite literally intruding on the present? Jackson's masterpiece — a carefully woven portrait of a woman and a house, neither sane, possessed by malign forces — is the high-water mark for both genres. Read this novel once and you'll be haunted yourself: Jackson's influence can be found everywhere in contemporary horror, Gothic and psychological fiction.

If you read it and love it, try ... "Wylding Hall," by Elizabeth Hand; "The Girl From Rawblood," by Catriona Ward; or "White Is for Witching," by Helen Oyeyemi.

I like my books with a twist — the darker, the better



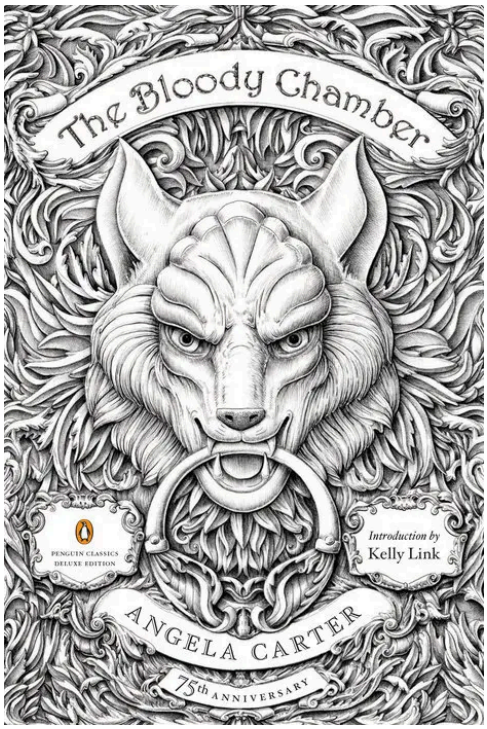
Sharp Objects

by Gillian Flynn

Flynn's debut novel is a clever and disturbing marriage of Southern Gothic and crime fiction. When an unstable journalist with a compulsion to carve words into her skin is sent to investigate the disappearances of two girls in her hometown, she's confronted by her domineering mother, her teenage half sister and a whole lot of familial skeletons and small-town ghosts she'd hoped to forget. The book's atmosphere — clammy, grimy, oppressive — makes it unforgettable; for every dark twist you anticipate, there's a darker one just around the corner.

If you read it and love it, try ... Karen Russell's "Swamplandia!"; "Summer Sons," by Lee Mandelo; or "Sing, Unburied, Sing," by Jesmyn Ward.

Give me blood-soaked fairy tales



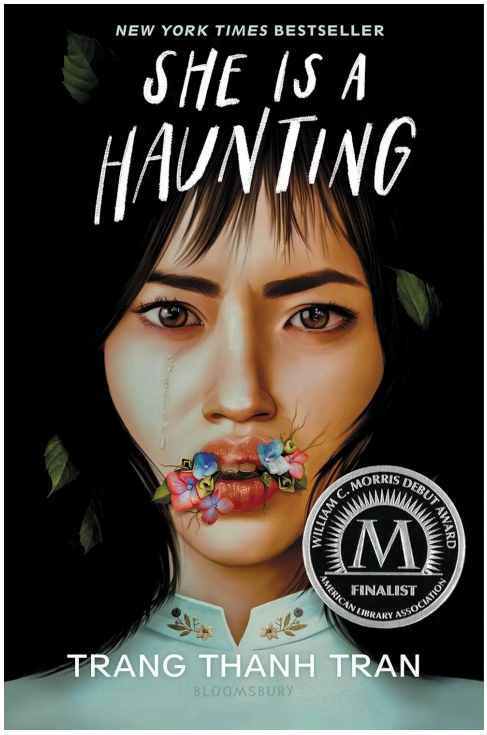
The Bloody Chamber

by Angela Carter

Carter's feminist reimaginings of fairy stories and folklore are decidedly not for children. These tales are full of swirling desire, violation and unease, told in sumptuous and destabilizing language: The Gothic hangs from every sentence like a moth-eaten tapestry. If you only have time for one story in the collection, make it "The Lady of the House of Love" — a classic vampire tale with reversed gender roles, set against the backdrop of the first World War.

If you read it and love it, try ... Cynthia Pelayo's "Vanishing Daughters"; A.G. Slatter's "The Path of Thorns"; "Sleep Like Deaths," by Kalynn Bayron.

I want to broaden my geographic horizons



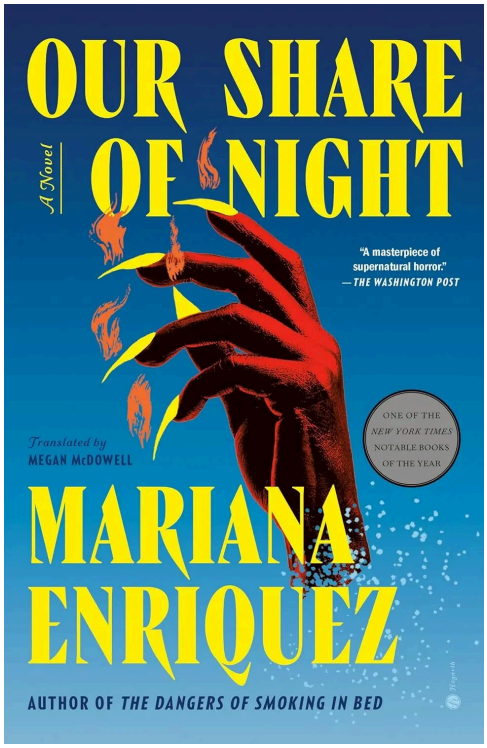
She Is a Haunting

by Trang Thanh Tran

Tran's excellent young adult novel (don't let that label deter you!) follows Jade, a Vietnamese American teen spending the summer in Vietnam with her estranged father as he renovates a French colonial mansion. Of course, the mansion is haunted. Jade is plagued by strange noises, invasive insects and a ghost bride who seems to be trying to communicate with her. The book is a thrilling read, and a nuanced examination of diasporic identity and the lingering scars of occupation.

If you read it and love it, try ... "Mexican Gothic," by Silvia Moreno-Garcia; "Wide Sargasso Sea," by Jean Rhys; or "The Creation of Half-Broken People," by Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu.

What's up with Latin American Gothic?


OUR SHARE OF NIGHT
A Novel
"A masterpiece of supernatural horror."
— THE WASHINGTON POST
ONE OF THE NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOKS OF THE YEAR
Translated by MEGAN McDOWELL
MARIANA ENRIQUEZ
AUTHOR OF THE DANGERS OF SMOKING IN BED

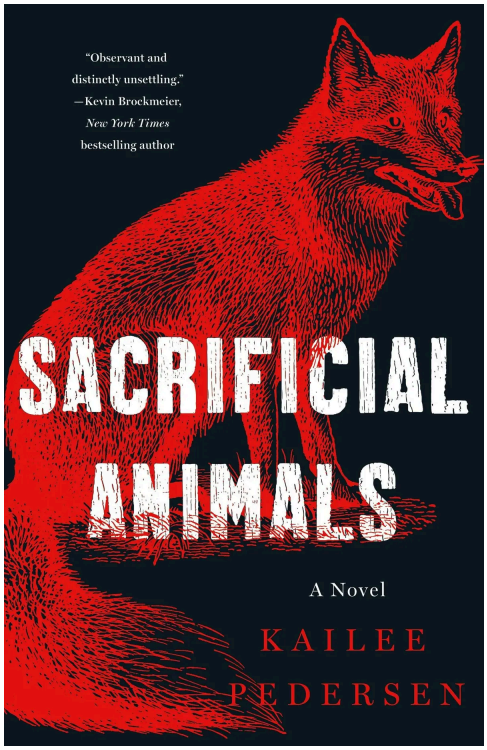
Our Share of Night

by Mariana Enriquez; translated by Megan McDowell

Latin America's own strain of Gothic fiction is heavily informed by the region's social, political and colonial history. Enriquez's fiction in particular often grapples with the traumatic legacy of Argentina's military dictatorship. Her novel "Our Share of Night," set during and after the Dirty War, is a sprawling epic of restless spirits, occult rituals and the long, bloody reach of a secret society whose members offer human sacrifices to a mysterious entity, using the cover of the junta's "disappearances" to hide their activities. At the book's core is a story about a father trying to protect his son from forces bigger than either of them, and Enriquez is sure-footed as she shifts between the personal, the national and the global.

If you read it and love it, try ... "The Hacienda," by Isabel Cañas; "Bochica," by Carolina Flórez-Cerchiaro; or "Jawbone," by Mónica Ojeda, translated by Sarah Booker.

I love a frontier story



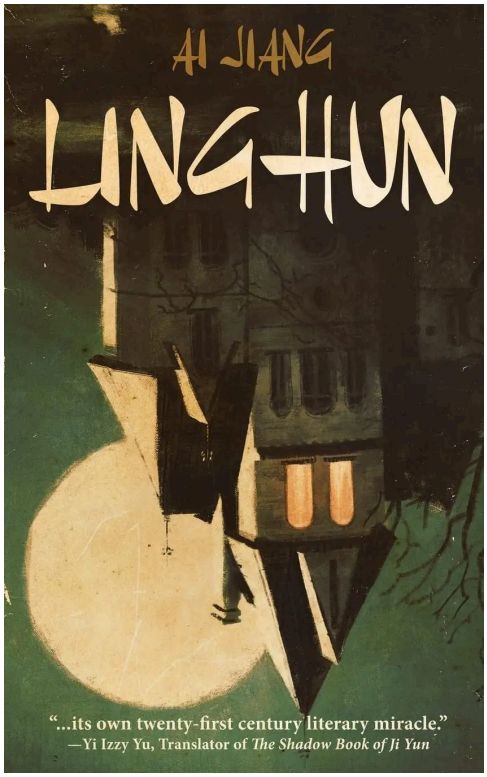
Sacrificial Animals

by Kailee Pedersen

When Nick and his brother, Joshua, return to their family farm to visit their estranged, dying father, Nick doesn't expect much in the way of reconciliation. What he does find is an unexpected connection with Joshua's wife, Emilia, a Chinese woman with hidden motivations and strange ties to a pivotal act of violence from Nick's past. In this polished debut — what I might call "frontier Gothic" — the stark landscape of rural Nebraska is shot through with calcified familial hatred and a vibrant strain of Chinese folklore.

If you read it and love it, try ... Cormac McCarthy's "Blood Meridian"; "Lone Women," by Victor LaValle; or "Daughters Unto Devils," by Amy Lukavics.

Give me haunted story with a modern political twist



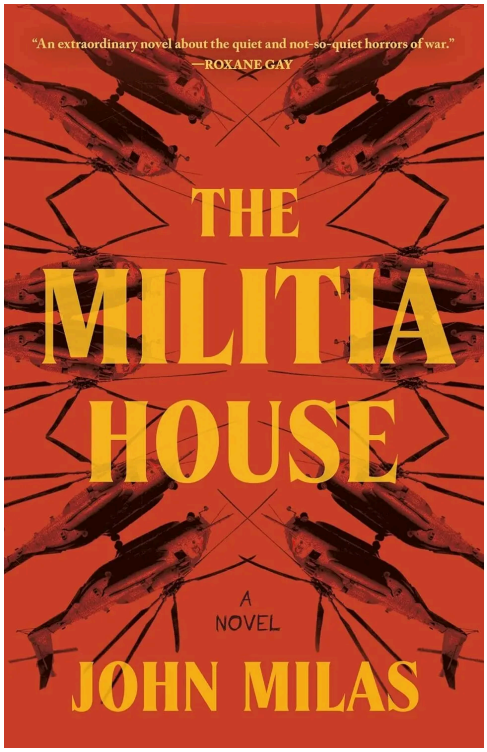
Linghun

by Ai Jiang

Jiang's stunning novella, which calls to mind the fiction of George Saunders and Shirley Jackson, presents a clever inversion of the haunted house trope, and a dark take on the housing crisis. Families who buy houses in the town of HOME can expect to be haunted — in fact, that's a selling point. In these homes, grief can call lost loved ones back to you; when Wenqi and her parents move in, they're eagerly awaiting the return of her dead brother. But there are only so many houses in HOME to go around, and just beyond Wenqi's door is a different kind of haunting: other families who linger on lawns and sidewalks in the hopes of securing a haunted house of their own. It's contemplative, dystopian and utterly moving.

If you read it and love it, try ... "Model Home," by Rivers Solomon; Carissa Orlando's "The September House"; or "A Head Full of Ghosts," by Paul Tremblay.

I want a book with an unusual setting



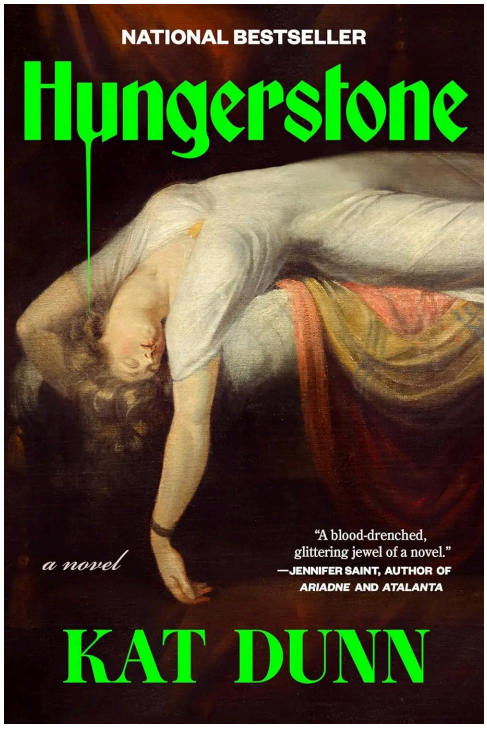
The Militia House

by John Milas

How does an abandoned barracks in the Afghan desert sound? In 2010, Corporal Loyette and his men, newly stationed at a remote outpost and bored to tears, decide to check out the supposedly haunted building just off base, which was the site of the massacre of a group of Soviet soldiers two decades prior. But even once they've left the barracks, the barracks will not leave them, and strange occurrences around their base leave the American Marines increasingly terrified. This captivating novel is at once a study of wartime PTSD and a swirling Gothic nightmare.

If you read it and love it, try ... "The Unworthy," by Agustina Bazterrica, translated by Sarah Moses; "Coup de Grâce," by Sofia Ajram; or "Thin Air," by Michelle Paver.

I'd like a contemporary retelling of a Gothic classic



Hungerstone

by Kat Dunn

J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella "Carmilla" has gained a cult following for its pre-"Dracula" pioneering of the vampire story, and for the sublimated homoerotic relationship between its titular bloodsucker and Laura, the daughter of a wealthy English gentleman. Dunn's novel reimagines "Carmilla" for an era of explicitly queer sexuality and romance: Here, Carmilla is not so much a predator as she is a catalyst, helping to bring Lenore (a rechristened Laura, now a steel magnate's wife) into her own power and showing her how to own her truest, darkest desires.

If you read it and love it, try ... "What Moves the Dead," by T. Kingfisher; "Frankenstein in Baghdad" by Ahmed Saadawi, translated by Jonathan Wright; or "Her Wicked Roots," by Tanya Pell.